

Radiation risk off Scilly

Mid-Atlantic loss of a Soviet sub recalls a danger closer to home. David Fairhall reports

THE LOSS of the Soviet submarine in mid-Atlantic has prompted concern about another Soviet nuclear-powered boat which sank about 150 miles off Land's End 16 years ago, and which could pose a much more immediate and serious threat of radioactive contamination.

The earlier accident, involving a November class hunter-killer submarine, is believed to have followed an explosion in one of its propulsion reactors and seems to have left the wreck lying in much shallower water.

The Soviet Government has more than fulfilled its commitments under the new international convention on the early notification of nuclear accidents by reporting each stage of this week's sinking to the International Atomic Energy Agency, but although the Soviet navy has kept watch on the earlier wreck it is not known whether the results of any monitoring have been passed to the West.

The agency was informed

on Saturday through the Soviet diplomatic mission in Vienna that a Yankee class nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine had suffered a fire and explosion on the previous day while on patrol in the North Atlantic.

On Sunday, the Russians further reported that the crippled boat was under tow, and at 6pm on Monday they told the IAEA it had sunk in spite of efforts to save it.

This last report added the information that the crew had been evacuated, the nuclear propulsion reactors had been shut down, and the possibility of nuclear explosion or radioactive contamination could be excluded.

These basic points were also made in Moscow by the official Soviet news agency, Tass. But the fact remains that the Soviet Union is not required to keep the IAEA informed even when the new convention comes into force on October 27.

The next interesting ques-

tion is whether the Russians will now pass on the results of any monitoring for radioactive leakage they may do around the sunken submarine, or have already done near the wreck of another Soviet nuclear-powered submarine which went down in 1970 about 150 miles off Land's End.

If there is a serious danger of contamination from rupture or corrosion of the nuclear reactors there is far more reason to be concerned about the earlier accident.

That involved a November class hunter-killer boat, the earliest of that type to be nuclear-powered in the Soviet navy. It sank after an accident involving a propulsion reactor, which according to one Western account was destroyed by a steam explosion after its cooling circuit had become contaminated by sea water.

The exact depth at which it is lying has not been published, but a position 150

miles from Land's End would put it on the edge of the continental shelf — that is much shallower than the 18,000 feet of water in which the Yankee class boat is now lying.

The greater the depth, the more the underwater pressure is likely to crush the submarine's hull and machinery, but, whereas the crew of the ballistic missile submarine apparently had time to shut down its reactors before abandoning ship on Monday, the explosion in the November class boat presumably prevented this, at least in one of its two reactors.

A Soviet Don class submarine depot ship remained above the wreck for some time, apparently to warn off Western naval intruders, and, according to a Pentagon source, the Russians continued to monitor the spot until about 1980. But it is not known whether they found any radioactive contamination and, if so, whether they informed anyone else.

...NewsWatch March 14-April 16, 1988

£1m CLANGER HITS SUB

A TOP shipbuilding firm has made a £1 million blunder.

Somehow a huge section of a submarine was welded on UPSIDE DOWN.

Now Vickers has launched a major inquiry into what one influential union leader calls "a senior management cock-up."

Order

The firm is refusing to say exactly what went wrong, but it is believed to be a result of a revolutionary change in shipbuilding technique.

THE STAR, Friday, April 8, 1988

Mike Smith, Press officer for the Barrow Cumbria yard, would not comment on whether heads would roll over the SSN19, last of the Trafalgar class subs.

Nor would he enlarge on fears that the affair could jeopardise the company's bid for a prestigious Canadian order if it came to the notice of the yard's French competitors.

All Mr Smith would say was: "A section of the SSN19 has been welded

into an incorrect position. An investigation is currently underway into how this occurred.

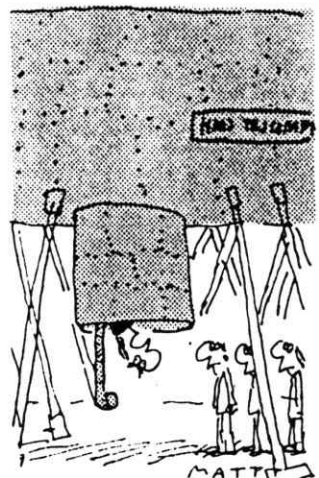
Lost

"It is unlikely to have any effect on the building programme for the vessel."

The submarine, due to be named *Triumph*, is under construction in the new Devonshire dock hall.

In February two sections for Trident submarines were lost overboard from a cargo vessel taking them to Barrow.

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'Yes, they will notice'

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